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Looking for Someone Special: Special Collections Cataloging, 1980-2000 and Beyond

Beth M. Russell

Beth M. Russell is head, Special Collections Cataloging, Ohio State University Libraries, Columbus.

The provision of access to materials in special collections intersects the fields of cataloging and special collections librarianship, sharing characteristics and challenges with both. In order to reveal the changing expectations regarding special collections cataloging professionals, the author examined job notices for positions advertised in C&RL News from 1980 to 2000. Three related hypotheses were tested in this study: fixed-term appointments would become more common; published requirements for consideration would be more rigorous; and positions would offer less relative compensation than in the past. These hypotheses were demonstrated to be untrue. In a larger context, the results of this study can be extrapolated to suggest means of improving education and training for professionals in special collections cataloging, highlighting the skills and abilities future employing institutions will be seeking.

The provision of access to materials in special collections intersects the field of cataloging and special collections librarianship, sharing characteristics and challenges with both. Job notices for special collections cataloging positions serve as evidence of the expectations placed on these professionals, as well as providing clues about education, training, recruitment, and retention of special collections cataloging librarians. If the practice and profession of special collections cataloging has changed significantly over the past twenty years, advertisements for its positions should highlight these changes.

The shifting landscape of academic library positions is well documented. A recent survey of advertised positions in Association of Research Libraries (AHL) institutions (Simmons-Welburn 2000) showed a greater emphasis on technology; including requirements for knowledge of operating systems and markup languages. The report suggests changes wrought by organizational structures and technology have driven the changing roles of librarians and other professionals in AHL libraries.

These changes have been felt in special collections organizations as well, which many in the field see as having evolved over the past several decades from serving primarily as “treasure rooms” into providing vigorous stewardship and promotion of a wide array of research collections across disciplines and formats (Oram 2000, 44). For example, at the Ohio State University, special collections include Japanese graphic novels (*manga*), avant garde writings, and theatrical realia, in addition to traditional rare books and archives in many languages and subject areas. Knowledge of several descriptive standards, controlled vocabularies for genres and forms, and an understanding of physical objects within the collections are required to catalog these types of materials adequately. At the same time, a stronger emphasis on eliminating backlogs in special collections will continue to challenge special collections catalogers; new approaches to promoting access and use are being proposed and attempted (Byrd 2001, 167).

Cataloging as a discipline also has undergone enormous changes in the past few decades,

leading to provocative discussions about the role of cataloging in future libraries. Professional catalogers are taking on training and management, leaving basic, and even less basic, cataloging to para-professionals and, in some cases, student employees. Technological changes, as well, have created new duties and differing work flows for catalogers, as well as creating opportunities for the wider application of outsourcing to cataloging work. Finally, organizational restructuring is often the cause of changes as well (El-Sherbini and Klim 1997).

Not surprisingly, anecdotal evidence suggested that these changes were manifesting themselves in special collections cataloging positions, with libraries requiring more from special collections catalogers and offering less. Informal discussions with colleagues clustered around three themes: administrators' difficulty in filling positions with qualified applicants, problems of training and continuing education, and the perception among catalogers of a proliferation of short-term appointments with relatively low pay and relatively high requirements. These themes are connected to issues of recruitment, training, and retention. The theme of the 2002 RBMS Preconference, "New Occasions, New Duties: Changing Roles and Expectations in Special Collections," provided the venue to present preliminary results of an historical content analysis of job notices for professional special collections cataloging positions.

Three related hypotheses were examined in this study: (1) over the past twenty years, fixed-term appointments would become more common; (2) published requirements for consideration would be more stringent; and (3) positions would offer less relative compensation. By examining job ads for evidence of systematic changes in the field of special collections cataloging, its changing role in the larger related fields would be highlighted. Suggestions for preparing the next generation of special collections cataloging professionals could be extrapolated from the results, highlighting the expectations and needs of libraries for the future.

Literature Review

Content analysis of job notices has a long and rich history in the library literature and one that need not be surveyed here. For such studies, job advertisements provide clues to the reality of library employment based on the assumption that "the ad will indicate the ideal job as defined by the employer and that the library will include in it the knowledge, skills, and abilities the library believes to be important at that particular point in time" (Lynch and Smith 2001, 410). The idea of using this approach in order to discern changes in the field of special collections cataloging was prompted by publications that took a similar approach. In particular, master's papers by Janet A. Hill (1992) and Mihoko Hosoi (2000) shaped the methodology of this study. Hill's work, although more general in nature, did survey the literature of content analysis historically, as well as sampling ads from 1990 in an attempt to capture a snapshot of the situation. Hosoi's analysis was much more compatible to the hypotheses of this study. Focusing on cataloging, Hosoi provides a snapshot of 1999 job ads as well as asking some of the same questions about her sample. Hong Xu's informative and ambitious survey of the impact of automation on library jobs as outlined in job notices (1996) was also interesting and helpful, although broader in focus.

David W. Reser and Anita V. Schuneman undertook a similarly ambitious survey of all academic library position notices in HISS. They found, among other conclusions, evidence that mainstream cataloging positions are more likely to require foreign language skills and previous work experience, and carry lower salaries than similar positions in public services (Heser and Schuneman 1992). Their methodology was used by Penny M. Beile and Megan M. Adams

(2000) to update the results for ads published in 1996. Beile and Adams found overall declines in the number of academic library positions and cataloging positions as well. They found that administrative duties appeared to be more common in technical services, but did not find that these positions were more likely to require previous experience. They also observed slightly higher mean salaries for technical services positions.

Michael Towsey's study of cataloging employment in the United States and the United Kingdom in the mid-1990s combined content analysis of job notices with questionnaires focusing on mainstream cataloging work (Towsey 1997). Among other findings, he concludes that there is no "evidence to indicate a collapse of demand for cataloguing skills by libraries and related organizations" (Towsey 1997, 61). Roxanne Sellberg argues, in a discussion of cataloging management, that "in spite of shared cataloguing efforts and automated systems, cataloguing is still a labor intensive and skill intensive process" (Sellberg 1998, 121). Suggesting the unusual position of special collections cataloging, she further emphasizes that this is especially true "in research libraries that collect numerous relatively rare materials" (Sellberg 1998, 121).

The failure of previous studies to identify special collections cataloging as a field with requirements and qualifications separate from other library fields might stem in part from the fact that previous studies did not always construct categories for analysis in the same way. For example, Hosoi simply includes "rare materials/special collections cataloging" as one of her subcategories. In their survey of the evolving and expanding roles of catalogers in academic libraries, Buttlar and Garcha (1998) found evidence that more academic cataloging professionals might be taking on responsibilities for cataloging rare and special materials, but analyzing these changing responsibilities was not part of their purpose. Lynch and Smith, in their recent overview of academic library work (2001), used separate categories for technical services and special materials positions, suggesting that overlapping positions in special collections cataloging might be impossible to isolate and might appear disproportionately absent from their findings. This lack of focus on special collections cataloging as a specialty sharing characteristics with both cataloging and traditional rare book librarianship confirmed that such an analysis would be valuable.

As with any subfield, special collections cataloging differs in scope and function from its larger parent disciplines. In organizations large enough to support specialization, cataloging and provision of access to special collections materials is often the function of different people than those cataloging a library's general collections. In addition to a long-standing focus on rare books, with corresponding requirements for knowledge of printing and book production processes, cataloging special collections also may require the use of specialized vocabularies and terminology to describe works of art, artifacts, music, or other types of materials. For libraries, archives, or other institutions focused solely on primary research material, special collections cataloging can be used to describe the function of all technical services operations. In some cases, librarians responsible for special collections cataloging, whether they are given titles such as rare book cataloger, technical service archivist, or special collections cataloger, often have more in common, in terms of expectations, qualifications, and duties, with each other than with cataloging colleagues in the same institution.

Methods

The number of positions advertised nationally as special collections catalogers is a

fraction of that for general academic library catalogers, and these positions are concentrated, not surprisingly, in larger research libraries. For this reason, the sample for this study was chosen from a single source, *College and Research Library News* (*C&RL News*), rather than by sampling within given sources. In order to test for electronic distribution of job notices, the archives of the special collections electronic mailing list Exlibris for the years 2000 and 2001 were examined, but were excluded from the study since there were only a small number of positions advertised there that were not also published in *C&RL News*. Colleagues' suggestions that the *Chronicle of Higher Education* be consulted proved interesting, but the volume and scope of advertisements in this publication meant a twenty year study was impracticable. A six-month sample from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 1981 yielded no ads that had not also appeared in *C&RL News*. While individual positions may have been advertised only in the *Chronicle*, and individual institutions may advertise exclusively in this source, deducing overall trends in the field from the final sample should be possible. The chronological extent of the survey demanded a starting point that would provide an accurate view of changes in the field. By 1980, a certain familiarity with the now bedrock tools of the cataloging held, the bibliographic databases, could be assumed.

Selected job notices had titles such as rare book cataloger, special collections cataloger, or cataloger in a dedicated special collections library, or positions that appeared to be predominantly responsible for intellectual access to special collections material, regardless of title. While some ads obviously fell within the scope of the study, some notices, particularly those with little information, proved difficult to analyze. A technical services emphasis within a special collections context became the primary criteria for inclusion, regardless of terminology used. (Acquisitions duties, the other half of traditional library technical services, rarely were mentioned in special collections advertisements, perhaps because of organizational structures that separated these functions.) Supervisory positions with exclusive or primary duties in supervising special collections cataloging were included in the sample, as they demonstrated a possible career path, but administrative positions for special collections departments or technical services operations in general were excluded. Multiple postings of the same position within a short period of time were noted, but were only coded once.

In most cases, the information being analyzed was accepted as printed, with explicit information being required before coding. If a job notice did not state that the position would have supervisory duties or serve occasionally at a reference desk, it was not coded as such. Particularly with required experience, the advertised minimums were considered as written. At the same time, the variety of phrases and wording found in the advertisements necessitated some summarization. For example, many different phrases were used to describe the category coded cataloging knowledge: Library of Congress Subject Headings and Classification, MARC, even familiarity with one or both of the major bibliographic databases.

As the overarching purpose of this longitudinal study was to look for a pattern of change over time, the extent of statistical analysis was limited to univariate analysis. Other types of analysis could be conducted on this sample, but, for the most part, comparing yearly averages and finding little variation was sufficient to disprove the hypotheses. From the point of view of the potential job seeker, each requirement listed in an ad would be evaluated individually in order to determine whether she or he is qualified for a given position.

Results

All 138 ads that met the above criteria were included in the first large-scale analysis. Eighteen merit special discussion. In 1990, these positions were represented by a very brief notice as part of the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries' (PACSCL) "Initiative for the 90s." Hiring such a large number of catalogers certainly had an impact on the profession, but without more information about the jobs' duties and compensation, they could not be coded for other analysis beyond the general characteristics of the sample.

General Characteristics of Sample

The number of positions advertised varied greatly by year, with some obvious peaks in 1985 (13 positions) and 1989 (11 positions), in addition to the all-time high of 25 in 1990, bolstered by the 18 PACSCL positions mentioned above. Although only 4 positions were advertised in 2000, this is actually higher than some previous years during the period and does not seem to mark a declining trend.

More than 60% of the positions were in universities, either public (34%) or private (27%.) Commercial positions refer to those booksellers and auction firms that advertised for positions as catalogers and accounted for 5% of the advertised positions over the period of the study. A final, other category included independent research libraries, historical societies, and public libraries, and accounted for 31% of the jobs, bolstered by the advertised PACSCL positions. Public universities did seem to advertise a higher percentage of special collections cataloging jobs compared to private universities in the 1980s, but other differences in the type of institution were essentially constant throughout the period.

Pennsylvania, California, and Massachusetts had a relatively high percentage of special collections cataloging positions, advertising 28, 17, and 12 positions, respectively, during the last twenty years. Among Midwestern states, Missouri and Illinois advertised the most positions, 5 each, and Texas and Louisiana took the lead in the South, with 6 and 5 positions respectively. Not surprisingly, five states in the United States did not advertise a single special collections cataloging position in two decades. This indicates that professionals with geographic restrictions might have real difficulty building a career in special collections cataloging.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that the term rare books cataloger might be giving way to the more inclusive and more modern sounding special collections cataloger. In fact, titles appeared to vary greatly over time, even within the same institution, but were tied more toward department or collection than to changes in the field. For example, even though the earliest appearance of the title special collections cataloger was in 1985, positions were advertised for rare books catalogers in the late 1990s. This suggests that in many institutions, rare book cataloging is seen as a separate enterprise than special collections cataloging, dictated by the collection and its requirements, rather than as a forerunner of a more inclusive nomenclature.

After this initial analysis, the number of positions exhibiting a given variable was recorded as a percentage of the years total in order to yield more accurate comparison among years. This was necessary because the number of positions advertised varied greatly from year to year. For example, in some years, even if 80% of the positions displayed a given characteristic, the total number of positions could be quite small. Percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number.

The data collected in this study did not support the assumption that temporary, usually grant-funded, positions are becoming more common than permanent positions. In informal discussions, this assertion often is made, and temporary positions are usually blamed on a stingy

administration or on a perceived lack of value assigned to the cataloging enterprise. Even published studies have asserted that “[l]ibraries are increasingly finding themselves in the position of having to hire temporary employees for a variety of reasons” (Falk and Boettcher 2001, 44). Years such as 1993 and 1997 had a relatively high percentage of temporary positions, but this was largely because the total number of positions posted in those years was very low. From 1995 onward, 32 positions were advertised, and only 11 of those were temporary. In percentage terms, positions in the late 1990s were more likely to be permanent rather than term. The average length of the term positions was two years, rather constant throughout the period.

Although not related to the initial hypothesis, the question of other, noncataloging duties creating additional expectations for professionals became an object of concern, particularly given the evidence of expanding duties (Buttler and Garcha 1998, 316-17). In addition to requests for qualities such as communication, vision, and leadership, which are becoming more common in academic library job postings (Lynch and Smith 2001, 418), many ads used standard wording about participating in the mission of the library, planning and policy making, or other vague phrases. Research and publication, for example, were often noted where librarians are tenure track faculty. Other ads state that creating exhibits or leading seminars is expected of all librarians. Shelf preparation of materials or supervision of stack maintenance were noted in a few ads. Finally, some mixed positions, combining cataloging of special collections materials with other duties such as preservation, were listed.

Since determining the amount of time these activities would take is problematic and would probably depend on the person hired, analysis focused instead on two specific types of duties: supervisory and public service. (See figure 1.) Supervision would entail training, hiring, and other duties that would take time away from line cataloging, as would reference desk hours or other public service duties. Although supervisory duties are common in these positions, either area of responsibility appears to change over time. The relationship between this trend and the trend of deprofessionalization in cataloging merits further attention.

Based on trends in libraries in general, an increase in the number of positions that mentioned responsibilities for computer use beyond cataloging, perhaps in digitization projects and metadata creation, was expected. In fact, this was very rare in ads, even in the late 1990s, appearing in only a few positions. This is a direction worth tracking in the future, as digitization projects in special collections become ever more common.

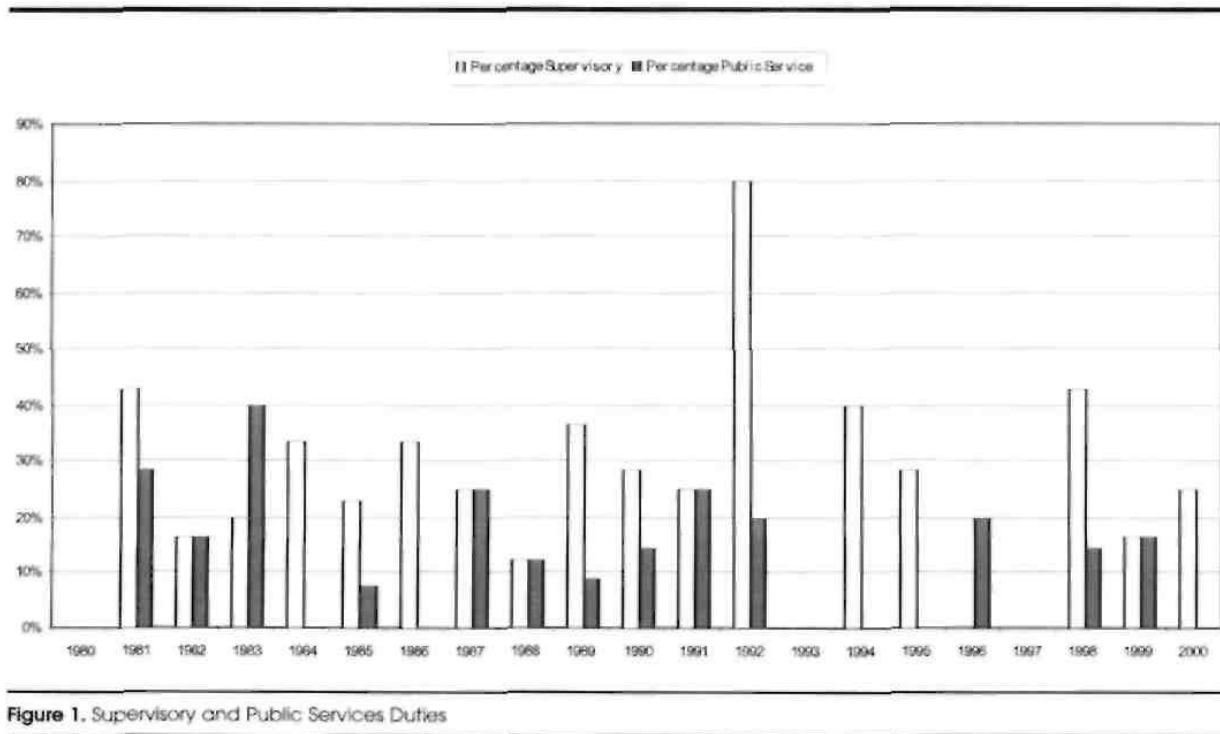
Job Requirements

Educational Requirements

Of the 120 ads analyzed, more than 87% (105) required the MLS/MLIS or equivalent (see figure 2). Equivalent was sometimes used very specifically to refer to a foreign degree equivalent to the MLS and, in some cases, to cover equivalent experience. The numbers in these categories were so small, though, that the MLS is still clearly the normative degree for professional cataloging positions across the last twenty years, regardless of minor institutional variations. This corroborates the findings of Reser and Schuneman (1992, 55), Beile and Adams (2000, 342), and of the ARL (2000, 11) for the field of academic libraries. The other category consists of 2 jobs that called for an MLS or an advanced degree, while one required at least a fifth-year degree in library science.

An often-heard refrain is that it has become more important to earn another advanced degree in addition to the MLS in order to be competitive for professional positions in academic

libraries. This study found only three positions advertised in the last twenty years that explicitly required another advanced degree, although the preference or desirability of a second masters degree or Ph.D. is often expressed. None of the ads posted in 2000 made any mention of an advanced degree, even at the supervisory level (see figure 3). Candidates with advanced degrees may have been more likely to be interviewed or offered the positions in question, but not having a subject degree would not necessarily keep an otherwise qualified candidate out of the pool.



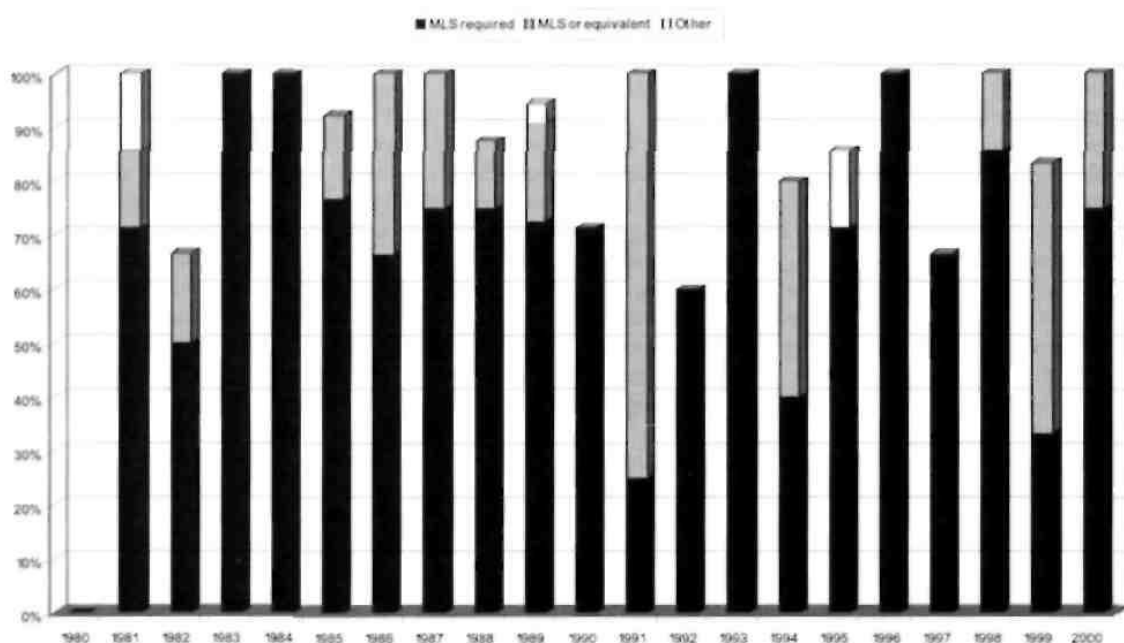


Figure 2. MLS Requirements

Experience

A small number of ads had an explicit requirement for a certain number of years' experience (less than 40%). (See figure 4.) Phrasing such as experience, cataloging experience, and special collections cataloging experience were all coded alike, since the variations among these categories were small and since specialized types of knowledge, such as descriptive bibliography or Latin paleography would be attainable not only through work experience, but also through internships, graduate study, or other activities. Most job ads that specified required experience gave a range of years, and the low end of this range was coded as the minimum required.

Eleven jobs were clearly advertised for experienced professionals, despite the lack of an explicit requirement of experience; some used phrases like "substantial experience as a rare books and manuscripts cataloger." For these notices, a special category for implied experience was created, since new professionals would not be competitive for these positions.

It appears that the percentage of positions requiring at least one year of experience was higher in the last few years of the 1990s than at other times. Although these years also showed an increase in the percentage of positions requiring three years or more experience, it might be hasty to conclude that entry level positions are becoming rarer. This hypothesis deserves further study.

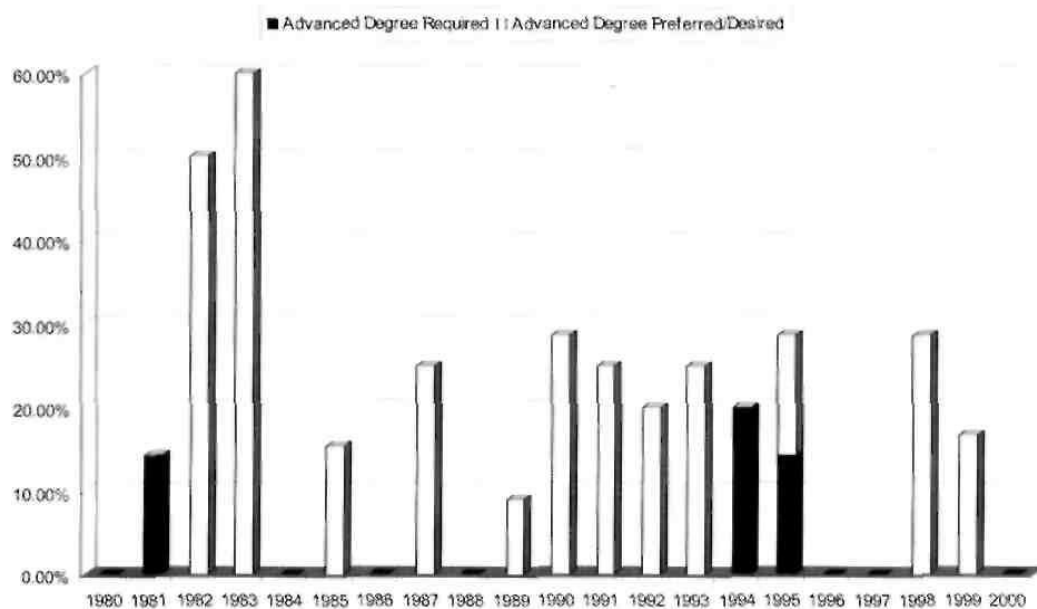


Figure 3. Other Advanced Degree

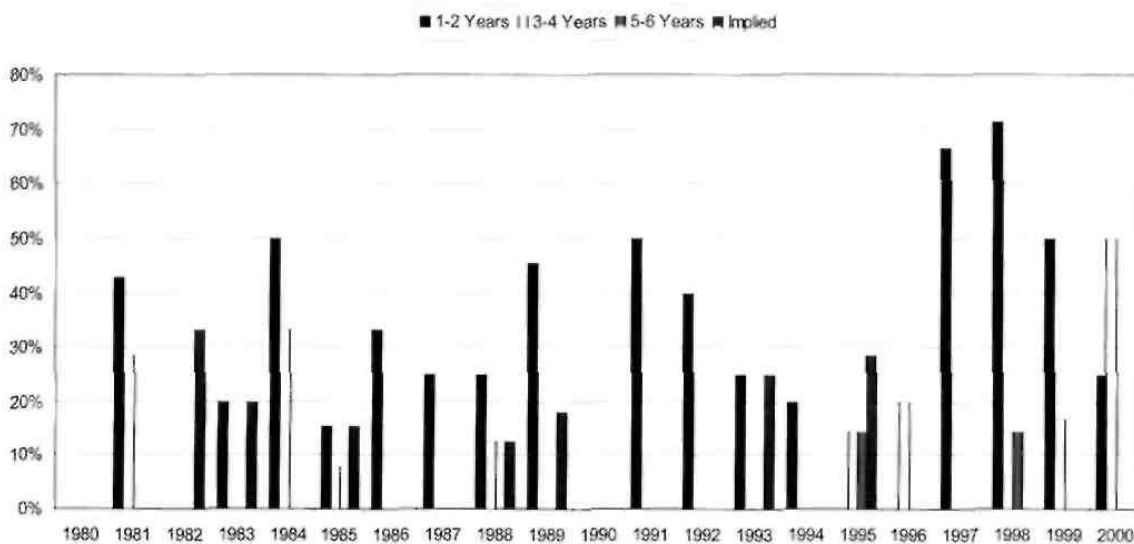


Figure 4. Years Experience Required

Skills and Abilities

The phrase “cataloging knowledge” was, of necessity, used to cover wording describing a wide range of skills such as Library of Congress Subject Headings, classification, and familiarity with the MARC format, to the ability to use OCLC and RUN. Since the cataloging enterprise in most academic libraries consists of the use of bibliographic databases, national or international

standards of description, and standardized vocabularies, acquiring knowledge and experience in one of these areas without also being familiar on some level with the others is essentially impossible. This requirement appeared to remain constant over time and was nearly as ubiquitous a requirement as the MLS, appearing in more than 60% of ads. As with categories of experience, further discrimination among types of knowledge might change these results; but this is not likely since most notices allowed for some of the knowledge to be acquired through course work or work experience.

A major aspect of traditional rare book librarianship that might be perceived as an onerous qualification is the requirement for skill in, or familiarity with, many foreign languages. In fact, the demand in job notices for Latin skills has been identified as a “predictable consequence of the demand for rare book cataloging” (Towsey 1997, 70), implying that cataloging knowledge of Latin is widely perceived to be a prerequisite of the rare book cataloging process.

To track this, phrases such as “reading knowledge,” “familiarity with,” and “ability to work with materials in” a given language were coded. The requirement for fluency in a foreign language was very rare, present only in a few cases where specific subject collections required language expertise. Nonetheless, most ads asked for some ability in a foreign language, and this remains steady over the period (see figure 5). Ninety-seven ads (80%) mentioned some foreign language skills, with Latin (31%) just beating out German (26%) for the most commonly mentioned by name. French was mentioned in 17% of ads, Spanish in 12%, and “a Romance language” was specified in an additional 6% of those ads that mentioned foreign language ability as preferred or desired. The “other” category (8%) included one job requiring Chinese or Japanese, one requiring Hebrew and Yiddish, a position requiring a Scandinavian language, and two positions that require skills in a “language of newspapers in California,” which could be one of the other categories, such as Spanish, but might be something else. These unusual requirements were found in ads for positions in subject-focused collections. Requirements of preferences for typical rare book languages such as Latin and German continued to appear in ads throughout the sample and show no signs of becoming less common in positions in the future.

While a few years of high school French might constitute an acceptable level of knowledge in a Romance language, other skills are harder to acquire. With the demise of some library graduate programs and the restructuring of curricula at others, the difficulty in acquiring training in fields such as bibliography and the history of the book has led to spirited discussions in the field of special collections librarianship and the recognition of the need to supplement the graduate school process with continuing education in rare book librarianship. For this study, phrases such as “knowledge of descriptive bibliography,” “background in the history of the book,” or “knowledge of early printing” were considered together in this category.

Also analyzed were the explicit requirements for experience with or knowledge of archives or manuscripts and other formats. Most positions requiring or preferring archives knowledge or experience were primarily responsible for archives or manuscript cataloging, with the exception of a few supervisory positions. The demand for a background in other formats (such as serials, music, or art) was almost exclusively explicit in format-specific cataloging positions (see figure 7).

Compensation

The most obvious facet of compensation is, of course, salary. Some ads in the sample did

note other types of compensation prominently, including tuition programs, retirement plans, and even the lifestyle offered by a given location, but these types of amenities would be impossible to compare across positions.

The rising yearly average of salaries does not address the differences in geographic area and level of position, let alone account for the rising cost of living. In an attempt to do this, the minimum salary listed was compared to an index figure. This approach is not without problems, and earlier authors have rejected comparing posted salaries with actual reported salaries (Reser and Schuneman 1992, 55). Nonetheless, it offers a method of comparing expectations for salaries over time. Since excluding the skeletal notices for the PASCL positions leaves 57% of the total positions in ARL libraries and 70% in universities, in general, the *ARL Annual Salary Survey* was chosen as the best choice for comparative historical data. Twenty years (1980 to 2000) of the *ARL Annual Salary Survey* were consulted.

Matching the geographic region of each notice along with the minimum years' experience required for the position to the corresponding average salaries for catalogers in the salary survey figures (University Libraries by Region) yielded an index that should account for absolute compensation across the field of cataloging, if not librarianship as a whole. The posted minimum salary for each notice was then divided by the salary index number to arrive at a salary percentage (minimum salary divided by salary index figure.) Each position's percentage was averaged by year to arrive at the yearly average of minimum salaries compared to ARL university library cataloging positions' average salaries, qualified by geographic region and years of experience.

Unfortunately, determining the hiring salary of these positions, particularly for those positions where the level of appointment depended on the experience and qualifications of the candidate, was not possible. Not all position descriptions listed a salary, so these were not included in the analysis, further limiting the sample. The goal was to determine if posted minimums were holding steady compared to the salaries of nonspecial collections catalogers: this appears to be the case, with special collections positions at between 83% and 102%, and averaging 93%, of corresponding academic library catalogers' salaries (see figure 7). The important question of whether all academic librarians are fairly compensated is outside the scope of this study.

A few observations about salary merit some discussion. With the exception of seven positions advertised in the mid-1980s, all the positions that advertised a minimum salary *more than* the corresponding ARL salary figure either advertised supervisory duties or stated that the position may supervise. A similar trend was found with positions that required or preferred a second advanced degree beyond the MLS. While there were well-compensated special collections cataloging professionals during the period who did not supervise or hold other advanced degrees, these attributes suggest a higher degree of compensation across the board.

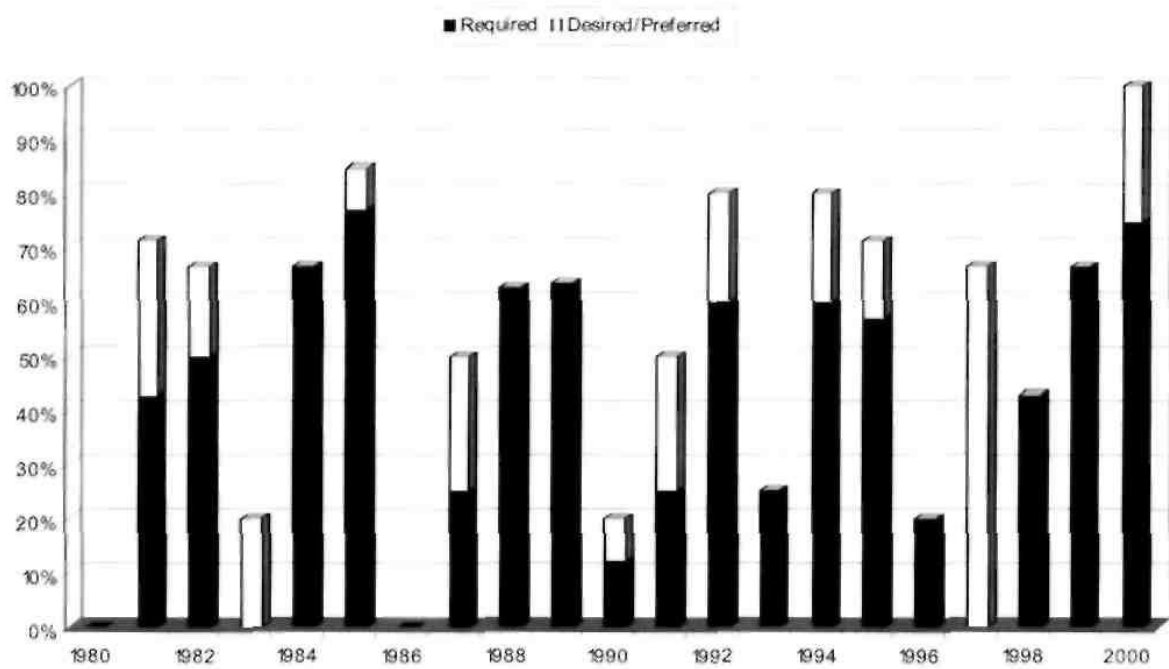


Figure 5. Foreign Language(s)

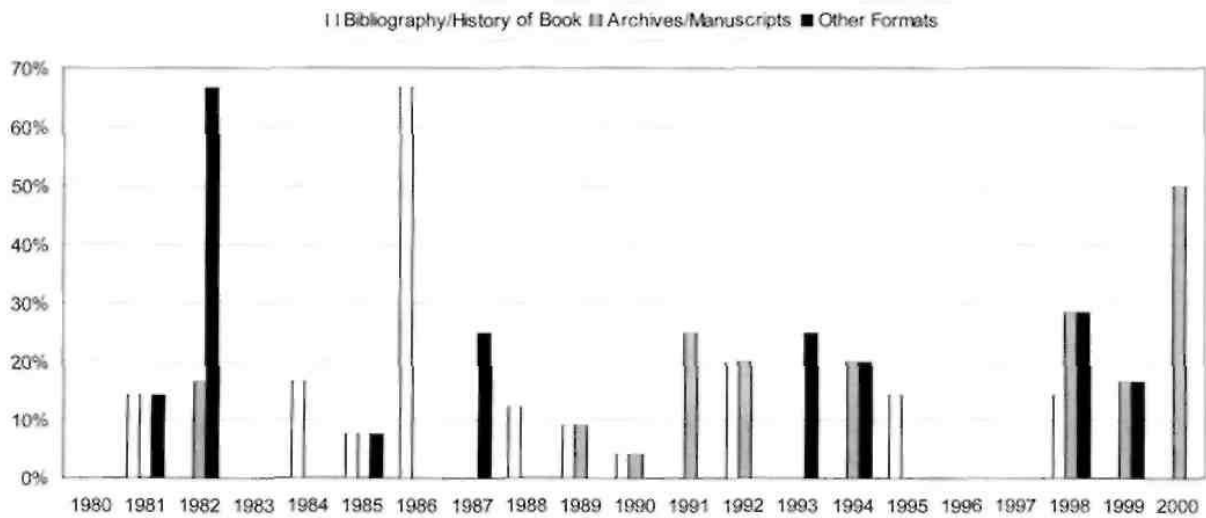


Figure 6. Other Skills or Experience



Figure 7. Salary as Percentage of Index

Conclusions

Ellen Crosby, in her discussion of technical services in twenty-first century special collections, asks, “[w]hat kind of people will be needed in the twenty-first century technical services department of a special collections library” (2000, 175)? If the requirements for special collections cataloging positions over the past two decades are any indication, the foreseeable future will require people very much like those currently in the field.

According to advertised job notices, most requirements and benefits for special collections cataloging positions have been in a steady state during the past twenty years and were based more on the type of institution and collection than on changes over time. University positions, for example, tend to have expectations of service while booksellers tended to be understandably less stringent in the requirement for the MLS degree. Although the analysis is tenuous, compensation appears to be holding steady, at least compared with peers in academic library cataloging positions. Finally, no evidence of a move to more temporary positions was found.

As comprehensive as this study became, questions still exist about the role of special collections catalogers in the field of librarianship over the past decades. Some of these can be answered by further analysis of this sample. Further discrimination in some areas between preferred, desired, and required qualifications and among types of language skills might illustrate more discrete trends, while more recent job notices might highlight cutting edge trends such as metadata creation for special collections digital libraries. Multivariate analysis might also yield interesting results.

Nonetheless, this study has illuminated several key-facts about special collections librarianship. While high expectations of Foreign-language expertise, traditional rare book skills such as bibliography, and expertise in cataloging may be unrealistic, special collections catalogers have laced such expectations in the past and appear to have met the challenge. These are predictable skills that can be anticipated by professionals seeking employment in these areas. While acquiring these skills might be more difficult, employers appear to be flexible in allowing practica, internships, and other types of learning as evidence of sufficient mastery. Technological changes will necessitate experience with new standards, software, and the like, but once again catalogers have proven up to the task. As recent history demonstrates, predicting which computer programs and practices will turn out to be essential is next to impossible.

The career advice given to the author almost ten years ago was to earn an MLS, to brush up on foreign languages, and to acquire experience in a rare book library by any means necessary. Although special collections catalogers have created a lot of metadata since then, this advice still seems worthy of consideration by someone attempting to build a career in special collections cataloging in the near future.

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